

Reading and Reacting to a Michigan Poem

Introduction

The feature article in this issue is about Michigan, a state known for, among other things, the great outdoors. Michigan has plenty of woods and wildlife and, in the winter, usually gets a lot of snow. The poem “How Is It That the Snow” (see next page) was written by a poet who lives in Michigan.

In class, you can use any or all of the activities and questions here, depending on your students’ English ability and your goals for the class. But even advanced students can benefit from the pre-reading and other introductory activities as a way to develop their appreciation and understanding of the poem.

Pre-Reading

Your students might never have seen snow, or they might have seen it only in pictures and in movies. Or your students might have firsthand experience with snow. To introduce the topic, ask your students, “What are the sights and sounds you associate with snow?”

Students who have seen snow will probably relate their experiences, whereas students who have not seen snow will have to use their imaginations or draw upon images they may have seen in movies or in pictures. If your class includes students who have firsthand experience with snow as well as students who do not, you might want to divide the class into two groups, have the groups discuss answers to the question, and then compare their responses.

Listening

This activity can prepare students to read and discuss the poem.

Tell students that you will read the poem to them. Ask them to listen carefully for words or phrases that they recognize. Then read the poem to students once.

When you have finished, have students write down words and phrases they remember from the poem—either words they heard or words that the poem makes them think of. For example, one student might write *silence*, while another student might write *quiet*.

Read the poem to students again, asking them to listen without writing. After you read the poem, ask students to add to their list of words and phrases. When they finish writing, you might have students form pairs or small groups and compare their lists.

Becoming Familiar with the Poem

Hand out copies of the poem to students. (This poem is fairly short. Instead of handing out copies, you could write the poem on the board or project it on a screen. You could then do this activity together, as a class.) Then give the following instructions:

1. Circle all the colors you find in the poem.
2. Underline the names of all the animals you find in the poem.
3. Underline twice words that identify plants or parts of plants.
4. Compare with a partner.

This kind of activity, where students search for items in a text, is an effective way of getting students to read the text multiple times. As they locate the items (in this case, colors, animals, and plants), they become increasingly familiar with the text.

Discussion Questions

Remind students that questions about poetry don’t always have “correct” answers. Students should read the poem carefully, but to answer questions, they may have to use their own knowledge and experiences—and maybe their imaginations, too.

1. Where do you think the poem takes place? What words in the poem give you that idea?
2. What sounds do you think you would hear if you were in the place described in the poem?
3. When we amplify a sound, we make it louder. What does it mean to you when the poet says that the snow “amplifies the silence”?
4. At the beginning of the poem, why do you think the poet asks a question? He could say, for example, “The snow amplifies the silence.” Why do you think he asks a question instead of making a statement?
5. What is your answer to the question the poet asks in the first four lines?
6. The poet says, “Some deer have stood on their hind legs to pull the berries down.” How do you think he knows this? What clues would he see that would tell him this?
7. Where do you think the deer are at the time described in this poem? What do you think they are doing?
8. In the line that says, “Now they are ghosts along the path,” who or what are the ghosts? Why do you think the poet chose the word *ghosts*?
9. What do you think the “red wine stains” are?
10. The poet says, “A woodpecker ... taps out its story.” What might the woodpecker’s story be?
11. Are there any people in the poem? Why or why not (in your opinion)?
12. What mood or feeling does this poem give you?



A woodpecker taps on a snowy tree.

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006

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American Life in Poetry: Column 193

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

The first two lines of this poem pose a question many of us may have thought about: how does snow make silence even more silent? And notice Robert Haight's deft use of color, only those few flecks of red, and the rest of the poem pure white. And silent, so silent. Haight lives in Michigan, where people know about snow.

How Is It That the Snow

How is it that the snow
amplifies the silence,
slathers the black barb on limbs,
heaps along the brush rows?

Some deer have stood on their hind legs
to pull the berries down.
Now they are ghosts along the path,
snow flecked with red wine stains.

This silence in the timbers.
A woodpecker on one of the trees
taps out its story,
stopping now and then in the lapse
of one white moment into another.

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Reading

Silence is an important word in this poem. Ask students to read the poem silently. Then ask them to read the poem aloud. (Each student can read the poem at his or her own pace, without worrying about how fast or slowly other people are reading. You might want to allow time for students to read the poem several times.) Ask students if they noticed any difference in what they felt or understood when they read silently and when they read aloud.

Writing Practice

After students have discussed the poem and read it several times, give them this writing prompt:

You have heard, read, and thought about this poem. Now close your eyes and imagine the scene the poet wrote about. ... Imagine that you are at the place and time described in the poem. What can you hear? What can you see? Write a paragraph describing the scene. Use your own words, but feel free to borrow some of the sights and sounds the poet has used, too.

Active Verbs and the Weather

In the first four lines of the poem, the poet uses three active verbs to describe what the snow does. He says the snow *amplifies* (the silence), it *slathers* (the black bark), and it *heaps* (along the brush row). Ask students to think of a powerful or memorable weather scene that they remember seeing. They might even try to describe the scene to a partner. Then have students choose one of the following:

- The rain
- The sun
- The wind

Ask students to write three things about the rain, the sun, or the wind. Tell students to use three active verbs; even better, ask them to use transitive verbs and provide a direct object for each verb. Encourage students to be creative. When we say “The snow falls,” we are describing what snow actually does: It falls from the sky. But when the poet says that “the snow amplifies the silence,” or that it “slathers the black bark on limbs,” he is using descriptive language that might make readers think about snow in new ways. Encourage students to think about these other forms of weather in new ways.

Additional Writing Practice

Ask students to keep their own weather scene (from the previous activity) in mind and write a paragraph describing it. Help students get started by asking them these questions:

- What makes you remember that experience?
- What sights, sounds, or smells have stayed in your mind?
- What feelings did you have at that time?

Invite students to close their eyes for a few moments and try to recall specific details that they can add to their descriptions. After students finish writing, they can read their paragraphs to other students in small groups or to the whole class. (Option: For this activity, have students write a poem instead of a paragraph.)

Vocabulary

Knowing the meaning of these words can help students understand the poem and answer questions about it.

amplifies *v.* — intensifies, makes stronger (often used with sound)

slathers *v.* — spreads thickly

bark *n.* — the outside covering of a tree

limbs *n.* — branches of trees

heaps *v.* — piles up (*n.* — large piles)

brush *n.* — thick grass, weeds, small trees, and bushes growing low to the ground

hind *adj.* — rear; toward the back

flecked *adj.* — marked; covered with small marks or spots

timbers *n.* — wood; trees

woodpecker *n.* — a kind of bird that taps at trees, often digging for food under the bark

lapse *n.* — a pause; a passing of time

About the Poet

Robert Haight has published two collections of poems (*Emergences and Spinner Falls* and *Water Music*) as well as articles and essays on a number of topics. His interests, besides writing, include teaching, reading, fishing, gardening, and meditating. To learn more about him and to read more of his poems, visit his website: www.roberthaigh.com